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Democratizing Candidate Selection: Causes and Consequences

Pennings, P.J.M.; Hazan, R.Y.

published in

Party Politics

2001

DOI (link to publisher)

[10.1177/1354068801007003001](https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068801007003001)

document version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

citation for published version (APA)

Pennings, P. J. M., & Hazan, R. Y. (2001). Democratizing Candidate Selection: Causes and Consequences. *Party Politics*, 7(3), 267-380. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068801007003001>

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Party Politics

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Party Politics 2001 7: 267

DOI: 10.1177/1354068801007003001

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DEMOCRATIZING CANDIDATE SELECTION

Causes and Consequences

Paul Pennings and Reuven Y. Hazan

ABSTRACT

This special issue offers an up-to-date overview of the democratization of candidate selection, while giving attention to causes and cases from both past and present. The focus is on the consequences of internal democratization for the overall functioning of political parties. The contributions show that there are many forms of democratizing candidate selection. These differences mainly concern the inclusiveness of the selectorate that controls the candidate selection process and the degree of centralization of the selection methods, of which the role and composition of the selectorate are the most vital and defining criteria. The types of consequences and their impact on the functioning of parties are not univocal because there are different degrees of democratization. The empirical evidence presented by the contributions shows that moderate forms of democratization can have beneficial effects on party organizations – such as higher levels of membership participation – but that this effect is not certain. Radical forms, on the other hand, are more likely to distort party cohesiveness, and consequently weaken the quality of representative democracy.

KEY WORDS ■ candidate selection ■ intra-party democracy ■ party organization ■ primaries

In most modern representative democracies, the relationship between the party and the voter is weakening. The reasons are mostly related to increasing levels of education and material well-being, which make citizens more and more independent from parties, unions and other collective bodies of representation (Flanagan and Dalton, 1984; Mair, 1989; Schmitt and Holmberg, 1995; Poguntke, 1996).

The consequences of these trends for political parties are well known.

1354-0688(200105)7:3;267-275;016985

Most parties are confronted with dropping membership rates, which causes financial problems and also hampers the recruitment of candidates and the party organization as a whole (Daalder, 1992; Scarrow, 1996). Another consequence is that the number of floating voters is growing. The increase in electoral volatility causes (potentially) heavy fluctuations in the vote shares of parties. This strengthens the vulnerability of the party elites because their position increasingly depends on factors they cannot control, such as the media's coverage of electoral campaigns, the effects of political scandals, etc. (Kleinnijenhuis and De Ridder, 1998).

These tendencies indicate that parties no longer possess a stable electoral base. Parties therefore need to seek new methods of increasing their popularity and of gaining votes in elections. Shifts in party strategy are becoming more and more important for parties if they are to secure and enlarge their vote shares (Kaase, 1994; Scarrow, 1999; Wattenberg, 1991). Examples of this include the intensification of campaigning prior to elections, rather than ongoing partisan activities, and the focus on individual candidates rather than on the party.

However, there is another method that parties are adopting in order to increase their popularity, a process which is novel and has not received much scholarly attention – the democratization of candidate selection. By enlarging the number of those who have a say in the nomination and selection of candidates, parties can try to strengthen the sense of involvement of either members or voters. This can be done through varying degrees of membership participation, ranging from a mediated indirect party vote to unrestricted participation. Primaries belong to the unrestricted forms of membership participation, in which candidates are chosen by the party members ('closed primaries') or by the voters ('open primaries') (Carty and Blake, 1999; Hazan, 1997; Rahat and Hazan, in this issue).

As parties constitute the only apparatus that is in a position to select candidates, new forms of democratization have significant effects on the functioning of parties and of democracies as a whole. Parties play a double role here. On the one hand, they serve an intermediate function by giving voters a chance to select a representative. On the other hand, they also want to monitor who is selected. The representation of voters is clearly affected by the selection of candidates.

The democratization of candidate selection means that the controlling role of an exclusive selectorate diminishes so that more people – i.e. a more *inclusive* selectorate – have a direct say in who is selected and, hence, how they are represented. However, the evidence presented in this special issue also points in another direction: democratization may also strengthen the role of the party elites in the selection of candidates. To what extent and under which circumstances these contrasting effects occur varies, and the contributions that follow seek to describe and explain these differences.

The democratization of candidate selection is not a global trend, as there are significant differences in the degree to which parties open up their

selection procedures (Gallagher and Marsh, 1988; Norris, 1996). West European parties regulate their own candidate selection processes, and therefore have a greater chance of keeping the process under control. This is in contrast to US primaries, which are open by law, or to Israeli primaries, where the two main parties lost control of the process.

The consequences of the democratization of candidate selection are varied because different selectorates (i.e. bodies that select candidates) are likely to produce not only different kinds of parliamentary candidates but also different types of candidates for the party leadership. The major British, American and Canadian parties tend to have more open selection procedures than those common in Western Europe (although some major European parties are opening up their procedures, too). The US Democratic Party, the British Labour Party and the Canadian Progressive-Conservative Party are examples of parties in government that suffered a crushing electoral defeat. Those defeats led to considerable tensions within the respective parties and, in turn, to a request for party renewal that could lay the foundation for their return to power. In each instance, an important component of the argument was the need for greater democratization – to open up the party to new ideas, new groups and broader participation. But in doing so, the parties themselves changed in a number of significant ways and encountered many unintended consequences concerning their selection of leaders (LeDuc, in this issue).

Primaries have traditionally been more important in English-speaking countries than in Western Europe as a whole. But during the 1990s, forms of candidate selection involving internal party elections of various kinds have become an increasingly visible feature of Western European party politics. Examples are found in Denmark (Bille, 1994), Finland (Sundberg, 1994), Belgium (Deschouwer, 1994), Ireland (Farrell, 1994) and the UK (Punnett, 1992). There are, however, also examples of parties that continue to centralize the selection of candidates and leaders, such as the Dutch parties (Koole, 1994; Krouwel, 1999). In other countries, like Norway, attempts to centralize the selection processes have proven unsuccessful (Svåsand, 1994: 318). Hence, there is a wide variety in candidate selection procedures in European countries. This diversity can be explained by referring to the complex interactions between national laws, intra-party decision-making and the electoral fortunes of parties. However, the more parties are weakened by the loss of members and/or votes, the stronger the incentives will be to open up the process of candidate selection.

The logic of primary elections as observed in the United States suggests general patterns not directly applicable to the Western European cases because no party has opened up the process to its whole electorate – or is likely to do so. The US primaries were introduced in order to give voters a choice and to eliminate the manipulation of the presidency by party elites. US primary elections are run by state governments, so that parties have no direct control over the nomination procedure (Ware, 1996). According to

its critics, these primaries suffer from at least three problems: low voter turnout; insufficient information on choices; and the weakening of political parties (Epstein, 1980; Ranney, 1975). These problems were reinforced by the change from caucus/convention to direct primaries.

Western European primaries have, up until now, been founded on the membership principle, and are therefore different from US-style primaries. The European model is more restricted and mediated than the US primary. Within Europe there is more experience with the democratization of candidate selection than is often assumed. Scandinavia is an obvious example of this. In Sweden and Norway, the candidates are ranked as a result of an internal process; in Denmark, voters have the alternative of voting for a single candidate; and in Finland, the voters – not the party – decide who will be elected. As a result, in Sweden and Norway party members have more influence than the voters, while in Finland it is the voters who have more influence. Denmark seems to be an in-between case (Bille, in this issue). In Denmark, the selection of candidates for national elections has always been a matter for party members at the constituency/local level. The increasing role of the individual member in this process can be seen as an attempt to counteract the decline in membership levels, which was especially marked from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s (Bille, 1994: 144). Within the European context, the Scandinavian tradition of candidate selection appears relatively open and decentralized. Its consequences are, however, not comparable to those of US primaries. The traditional openness of Scandinavian parties is more restricted and its consequences are, therefore, moderate. For those parties that seek democratization, but also want to avoid unforeseen consequences, the Scandinavian routes are instructive.

The consequences of democratization for intra-party relationships are illustrated by the debate on the cartel party (Katz and Mair, 1995; Mair, 1994). Since the eighteenth century there has been a professionalization of party leadership. As the elite party was replaced by the mass party, and then transformed into a catch-all party, the central party elites became more important, and also more independent. In the meantime, society has become more complex and demanding. As a consequence, politicians have become more constrained in what they can deliver, but they also have increasingly become professionals, for whom the personal stakes of failure are high. The result, according to the Katz and Mair (1995) hypothesis, is the tacit formation of a cartel among the ruling elites. The consequences of this development are that real issues are kept off the political agenda, there is a limited class of inside participants and rules are used to shut out challengers to this new ruling class. These challengers are found mainly among the party activists. These activists become less powerful when party decisions are made, for example, by direct postal vote of the full membership, rather than by the party congress. Hence, when cartel parties open up and allow more influence of ordinary members on candidate selection, it would imply a strengthening of the party elites and of the cartel party model, which is, in

essence, not as democratic as the mass party once was. Democratization of the candidate selection process can, therefore, have the unforeseen effect of a further cartelization of parties (Katz, in this issue). This is the paradox of the democratization of candidate selection: democratization can go hand in hand with professionalization and cartelization. But this democratization concerns mainly the 'ordinary' members, who are more docile and prepared to follow the party leadership than the middle-level elite and the activists (Mair, 1994: 16). While this hypothesis has yet to be tested on the basis of empirical research in a broad variety of countries, one of the goals of this special issue is to examine varieties in the interrelationships between democratization and cartelization.

We also seek to take one step ahead and assess the consequences of the democratization of candidate selection (Pennings, 2000). In general, politicians show the greatest loyalty to the locus that has greatest influence on their re-election. For this reason, the cohesion of the party is closely related to the locus of selection. Party cohesiveness is important because it directly affects the quality of the democratic political process. When the decline of parties in terms of membership, finances and, incidentally, electoral support is countered by an opening up of candidate selection, the reaction seems to strengthen the problem instead of solving it, especially when democratization takes the form of primaries. The reason is that primaries invoke a direct relationship between voters and candidates that can weaken the cohesiveness and the intermediary role of the party organs. If candidates are chosen directly by voters or members, then the candidates, their views and preferences, could become more important than the programmatic profile of the party as a whole. Hence, the most important consequences are the loosening of party control over the behavior of its representatives, the changing of legislative working patterns and the introduction of both public and extra-party mediators – rather than the party – as the focal points of interaction. But, as stated before, these consequences have not been studied yet for a larger range of countries simultaneously – and that is exactly what this special issue intends to do.

The contributions in this special issue demonstrate that radical forms of democratizing candidate selection fundamentally alter the relationships between the parties and the candidates, between the parties and the voters, and between the party representatives and the party leaders. By putting candidates in a more independent position vis-à-vis the party and its leadership, primaries have, in several instances, undermined the loyalty of candidates to party policies and led to both a decrease in party cohesiveness and instability in legislative behavior. All in all, it is quite clear that the combination of 'cartelization' and primaries does not automatically lead to more democratization. When we look in general terms at the democratization of candidate selection for the cohesiveness and impact of parties we often see two consequences: First, the more unrestricted voter control becomes, the more dramatic and significant the consequences are; second, the negative

and unexpected consequences often outweigh the positive ones. These findings are clearly supported by the case study of Israel, for example (Rahat and Hazan, in this issue).

This special issue offers an up-to-date overview of the democratization of candidate selection, while giving attention to causes and cases from both past and present. The focus is on the consequences of internal democratization for the overall functioning of political parties. The articles in this special issue also address such questions as: Can parties and candidates find a new balance of responsibilities? Is the democratization of candidate selection truly democratic? Can the opening of candidate selection be a strategy of the party leadership to circumvent the party activists by empowering the rank and file – and now growing – party membership? Can this process be reversed? What are the consequences of intra-party democratization for the systemic functioning of democratic regimes?

In order to present a clearer picture of the causes and consequences of democratizing candidate selection, the articles pose the following questions and offer a detailed overview and analysis of theoretical, methodological, analytical and comparative aspects.

- What are the implications of the democratization of candidate selection for party theory? How is the functioning of parties affected and what are the possible implications for the role of parties within modern democracies? Richard Katz deals with these questions by comparing candidate selection within different models of party democracy.
- How do nomination procedures vary across parties and countries, and what is the impact of this variation on the nature of the candidates chosen and on legislative behavior? This question is addressed by Gideon Rahat and Reuven Hazan, who present an analytical framework of selectorates and selectoral systems, and assess their influences on competitiveness, representativeness, the level of intra-party conflict and legislative behavior.
- Do different selectorates produce different types of leaders? Lawrence LeDuc answers this question by pointing to three parties in different majoritarian systems. He reveals major, unforeseen consequences, such as the loss of control over the parties' selectorates and the issue of permeability, referring to the possibility that leaders are recruited entirely from outside the party.
- How do primaries function in Western Europe compared to the USA? Jonathan Hopkin makes this comparison and gives a detailed analysis of the effects of primaries in Spain and the UK. One conclusion is that the logic of primary elections is not directly applicable to Western European countries. The European model could be described as a mixed, or restricted, model of primaries.
- To what extent have parties used the democratization of candidate selection as a method of strengthening the relationship between voters and parties? Lars Bille examines whether the democratization of candidate

selection methods has actually occurred in the West European parties in general, and in Denmark in particular, during the period from 1960 to 1990. In Denmark, for example, the introduction of postal ballots increased the role of the individual member and made an already democratic procedure even more democratic. But, both in Western Europe and in Denmark, stability and modest changes are the dominant picture.

What these contributions do make clear is that there are many forms of democratizing candidate selection. These differences mainly concern the inclusiveness of the selectorate and the degree of centralization of the selection methods. Democratization often means adopting more inclusive candidate requirements and territorial or functional decentralization. However, neither territorial nor functional decentralization is crucial for democratization. Instead, the role and composition of the selectorate that controls the candidate selection process are the most vital criteria. As long as the more important and powerful selectorate continues to be a restricted and small party elite, decentralization will not lead to substantial democratization.

The types of consequences produced by democratizing candidate selection, and their impact on the functioning of parties, are not univocal because there are different degrees of democratization. The empirical evidence presented in this special issue shows that moderate forms of democratization can have beneficial effects on party organizations – such as higher levels of membership – but that this effect is far from certain. Radical forms, on the other hand, are more likely to distort party cohesiveness, and consequently weaken the quality of representative democracy.

Notes

This special issue is the outcome of a 1999 ECPR workshop at the University of Mannheim on ‘The Consequences of Candidate Selection’. We are indebted to all participants in the workshop who do not appear in this special issue and whose contributions to the lively discussions helped us develop and sharpen our arguments: Magnus Blomgren, John Ishiyama, André Krouwel, Richard Matland, Raymond Miller, Hanne Marthe Narud, Carmen Ortega, Geoffrey Roberts, Marco Schikhof and Henry Valen. We thank the numerous referees whose comments and suggestions helped improve the articles in this special issue: Joan Botella, Yitzhak Brody, Abraham Diskin, Michael Gallagher, José Ramón Montero, Hanne Marthe Narud, Pippa Norris, Mogens Pedersen, Susan Scarrow, Lars Svåsand, Henry Valen and Paul Webb. Our special gratitude goes to David Farrell and Ian Holliday, whose enthusiasm and support made this special issue possible.

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PAUL PENNINGS is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Political Science at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. His recent publications include *Comparing Party System Change* (1998, co-edited with Jan-Erik Lane) and *Doing Research in Political Science: An Introduction to Comparative Methods and Statistics* (1999, with Hans Keman and Jan Kleinjennhuis).

ADDRESS: Department of Political Science, Vrije Universiteit, De Boelelaan 1081-c, room U-401, 1081 HV Amsterdam, The Netherlands [email: PJM.Pennings@scw.vu.nl]

REUVEN Y. HAZAN is a Lecturer in the Department of Political Science at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. His research interests include parties and party systems, electoral systems, and legislative studies. His publications include articles in *Comparative Political Studies*, *Electoral Studies*, *Journal of Legislative Studies*, *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, *Party Politics*, *Political Geography* and various other journals. He is the author of *Centre Parties: Polarization and Competition in European Parliamentary Democracies* (2000), and co-editor of *Parties, Elections and Cleavages: Israel in Comparative and Theoretical Perspective* (2000).

ADDRESS: Department of Political Science, Hebrew University, 91905 Jerusalem, Israel [email: mshazan@mscc.huji.ac.il]